

The TB Situation and Heifer Growers

Recently a good friend and heifer grower from Washington State told me he has to TB test incoming heifers from Oregon for TB by time they are 6 months old and retest them as springers when they go back to the home dairy. Both Washington and Oregon are TB-free states. This costs this grower a lot of time, aggravation and money. How did we get in this situation?

State veterinarians, through pressure from their constituent livestock groups, are reacting extremely conservative and putting health requirements back into place that we haven't had to deal with for years. Why? After the demise of the national brucellosis control program we have no uniform ID system on our livestock to allow health officials to effectively perform epidemiological investigations with a high degree of effectiveness. Since we are having a hard time understanding where disease is coming from, the response is to throw up walls around our respective states to protect our own producers. This is a very costly solution in both time and money.

In 2004 there were 11 steer and 1 heifer case confirmed with TB. The southwest US seems to be the hotbed for this activity. Most of the limited trace back information leads authorities to suspect a strong connection to exposure to Mexican cattle either across the fence, co-mingling at some point or surreptitious origins from illegal sources, i.e. calves brought across the border. To illustrate the complexity of the Holstein steer business in this area, one feeder acquires 600 to 1000 head of steer calves from over 100 calf raiser-assembly persons per week. Even though these animals are identified by most of their growers at the various stages the ID's are often changed as they change hands to fit the new owners ID scheme. As a result the chain of ownership becomes broken and trace back to the original source is lost and is extremely frustrating and unrewarding to the animal health officials trying to solve this puzzle. Three positive TB cases were able to be traced back to two large New Mexico dairies and all cows were tested in those herds. All tested negative. This leads some officials to suspect that the Holstein steer calves that were attributed to have originated in these dairies may have come from elsewhere.

Dr. Terry Beals, APHIS veterinarian working on the national TB situation has given recommendations to PDHGA members.

1. Growers should strongly consider source verification and unique permanent individual identification that will support tracing animals subsequently found to have TB. Effective tracing to the herd of origin and thru subsequent trade channels is important for many conditions as well as TB.
2. Every effort should be made to prevent exposure of dairy replacement heifers to stocker/feeder/roping steers/spayed heifers of Mexican origin. From experience in the southwest we know this can happen in feedlot/growing lots; on grass or with regard to roping steers on the dairies.
3. If the grower isn't absolutely certain of the source of the heifer calf, liberally test these heifers at critical control points as they move through the grow-out process to become heavy springers; at least until a better understanding of what is going on exists.

In my opinion, this is just one more strong case for mandatory individual animal ID and the sooner we as all livestock producers accept it and get with the program the better off we will all be. I know for sure my friend in Washington State would rather have a RFID tag in all his heifers than have to worry with continual testing and record keeping. As long as it's a voluntary issue 95% of responsible livestock owners will comply and the shady dealers and less than ethical producers will still have an out to not comply. I truly feel that only when permanent individual ID becomes a requirement to change ownership of cattle and other livestock will we then be able to get to the source of these communicable disease problems and eliminate them. The cost of running around in the dark trying to trace these animals, government buyouts of infected herds and costs of testing and aggravation to livestock producers can amount to more than the ID system itself. Not to mention we are behind other developed countries in this area and it will help immensely with our export market. I think we as a heifer growing industry need to come to grips with this and support mandatory individual animal ID sooner rather than later.